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ABSTRACT

The Basics Skills English 100 course at Slippery Rock University, having changed from a traditional approach to an approach that reflects knowledge gained through research about the needs of basic writers, shows the progress basic writers can make in a summer program. Thirty students met six times a week for five weeks in one-and-a-half hour periods. Each day they practiced free writing, produced one or two pages of journal writing, and practiced sentence combining exercises. Evaluation was by teacher-written comments instead of a grade, by small group discussions, and by short individual conferences. The pre- and posttest measures--a Likert type attiatude scale, a T-unit analysis, and a holistic evaluation of in-class essays--demonstrated that current writing theory and research can be implemented successfully into pedagogy. By the end of the five-week program students indicated that they felt more confident of their writing skills, varied their syntax effectively within their essays, and improved the overall quality of their writing through careful revision. A collection of the students' best work was printed for distribution. (EL)

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From Practice to Publish: A Process-centered Approach to Basic Skills English 100

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Each year, Slippery Rock University admits educationally disadvantaged students through its Academic Support Services Department, which offers a summer remedial academic program to prepare them for college work. These students may be identified as basic writers by their SAT scores, writing samples, and attitudes. Until the summer of 1983, the Basic Skills English 100 course in this program had been taught in a current-traditional manner, emphasizing instruction in grammar. The authors of this paper decided that the course should be changed to reflect knowledge gained through research about the needs of basic writers. We believe that the success we have achieved in this course over the past two summers should be of considerable interest to other instructors of remedial English courses.

Each section of Basic Skills English 100 contained (unfortunately) approximately 30 students. The sections convened six times a week for five weeks, each period lasting one and one-half hours. For the past two summers we have not taught any grammar as such to these students but have worked on improving their attitudes about writing, increasing their syntactic fluency, and immersing them in the writing process. We sought to achieve these goals by implementing journal and other non-graded writing, sentence-combinig practice, small group discussion of drafts in progress, and numerous opportunities

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for revision at various levels. Also we offered students the chance to publish some of their best work in a collection of student writing which would be distributed to all students and parents, faculty and administration attending the summer program's closing banquet. This summer, as a highlight of the banquet, three students were given the opportunity to read their contribution to the collection.

Our pre- and post- test measures -- a Likert type attitude scale, a T-unit analysis, and a holistic evaluation of in-class essays -- demonstrate that current writing theory and research can be implemented successfully into pedagogy. By the end of the five-week program students indicated that they felt more confident of their writing skills, varied their syntax effectively within their essays, and improved the overall quality of their writing through careful revision.

To build the students' confidence and thus improve their attitude about writing, we had our students practice free writing daily, often as a pre-writing technique to generate topics and details for essays. The free writing, general or focused, usually occurred during the first part of class, building in time from five to fifteen minutes, preparing students for further class writing and providing subjects for more detailed consideration in the personal journal, which was the second strategy we used to improve students' attitudes and confidence about writing.

Students were asked to produce a minimum of one or two pages of journal writing per day on a topic of personal interest to them. They were encouraged to focus on their daily experiences in the Academic Support Services Department Summer Program or on topics that they might want to pursue further in a more formal essay.

Several students revised journal entries for eventual inclusion in the program anthology. Although they were free to create their own topics, a list of possible subjects was distributed for their consideration. We did not grade the writing in the journals, giving the students, instead, credit for the amount they wrote. Our written comments were of a conversational nature, often providing the basis for a continuing written dialogue.

The personal journal also was a strategy to encourage students to write frequently for personal exploration and possible preparation for more formal assignments without fear of evaluation. This tool broadened the scope of students' perception of writing as a means of communication not only with others, but also with themselves. Additionally, it served well as an invention technique to engage the students in the writing process.

To determine if daily free writing and journal keeping effected positive change in students' attitude, we administered a Likert-type attitude scale on the first and last day of class. In this scale, students were asked to respond to statements such as, "I never look forward to writing down my ideas," "I am afraid of writing when I know it will be evaluated," and "I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing," by rating them one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). In the summer of 1983 the students showed positive growth in 16 of 20 items; in the summer of 1984 positive growth increased to 18 of 20 items.

Our second goal was to increase our students' facility with the syntactic structures of formal written English, for Mina Shaughnessy notes that if syntax is defined as "a system for

indicating the relationship between words in sentences," then most of basic writers' errors (save misspellings) are the result of syntactic problems.[1]

To help our students become more familiar and facile with syntactic options, we had them practice both cued and uncued sentence-combining on the sentence and whole discourse level, the latter specifically to increase their awareness of the choices and decisions a writer makes with regard to audience and purpose while composing. Through sentence-combining exercises, our students encountered and practiced increasingly complex sentence structures every day. Frequently, they placed their work on the blackboard for review and discussion by the class. Also, we mimeographed weekly several students' responses to the same whole discourse assignment, so that students, in small groups, could examine, compare, and discuss each other's choices, focusing on how well the resulting essays accomplished their intended purpose, in addition to how successful they were in coherence and tone.

We conducted a T-unit analysis of the students' pre- and post in-class essays to determine if students indeed had increased the syntactic maturity of their sentences, following the procedures described by Andrew Kerek, Donald Daiker, and Max Morenberg.[2] Focusing on T-unit word length, we discovered that they had increased their T-units by 2.231 words, a statistically significant difference at the .05 level.

Our third goal was to engage our students in the writing process. Researchers agree that, contrary to popular opinion that basic writers write poorly because they have not yet mastered basic skills, these writers have mastered a set of skills, but

they possess only a truncated writing process in which they ineffectively apply or misapply the basics they have absorbed.[3]

We used several strategies to involve our students in the writing process, some, such as free writing and journal keeping for invention purposes, already noted. In addition, on a daily basis we had our students meet in small groups, first working on simple tasks such as learning to generate questions and elaborate details, but ultimately leading to an opportunity for them to brainstorm and share ideas for essays and to give and receive feedback on work in progress in a supportive writing community.

We also met regularly with students on an individual basis during class to discuss and evaluate work in progress. These short (five to ten minute) conferences were student-centered, during which the student talked about his or her piece of writing, discussing the process by which the essay had evolved, identifying technical difficulties, and asking questions.

Finally, to increase their awareness of audience and the importance of revision, we told students that particularly well written essays or journal entries would be published in a collection of student pieces generated during the summer program. This student anthology entitled "Discoveries -- The Summer of '84" was bound and illustrated with student art work.

We expected, of course, that if our students wrote daily, consciously participating in the writing process, writing would improve. To determine if their skills had improved over the five week period, we had the students write a pre-test in-class expository essay the first day of class and post-test in-class expository essay during the last week of class. For both these

tests the students had a choice of the same three topics, each topic emphasizing the intended audience and purpose of the assignment. The students were not permitted to chose the same topic for both their pre- and post-tests, however. We then asked independent raters -- an English professor, an English graduate student, and a secondary school English teacher -- to evaluate the essays holistically focusing generally on content, organization, and mechanics. The raters, unaware of which in the pair was the pre-test and which was the post-test, were simply asked to identify which of the two was better for each pair. Overall, the raters judged that 70% of the students had indeed improved their writing skills during these five weeks of instruction.

Overall, we are quite pleased with the progress our basic writers have made. The post-test results showed they had improved significantly their attitudes about writing, syntactic maturity, and overall writing ability. Many of the final journal entries were testimonials to the course and the progress they knew they had made. The collection of their best work was printed, as promised, and distributed to the students, their parents, and summer program faculty and administrators at the banquet closing the program. Not only the students and their parents, but also the faculty and administrators wre impressed with the creativity and quality of the selections. Both the affective and academic success promoted by this process-centered approach to teaching Basic Skills English 100 has convinced us of its efficacy for future programs.

Notes

[1]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 46.

[2]Andrew Kerek, Donald Daiker, and Max Morenberg, "Sentence Combining and College Composition," Perceptual and Motor Skills, 51 (1980), pp. 1059-1157.

[3]Mike Rose, "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitive Analysis of Writer's Block," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), pp. 389-401.